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Feral Hope for Futurist Leaders

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I do not want to scare you with this article. I just want to wake you up. The words of the angel to the church at Sardis—an affluent and comfortable church with a good reputation—play on loop in my consciousness: "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death…" (Revelation 3:2a). An angelic alarm for a church in denial of the reality that surrounds them. A church on the brink, yet unknowing—or, at least, *unwilling to see*.

We understand. Fatigued by the unrelenting insistence of the era; so drowsy we can barely keep our eyes open to the world around us. Our attention shattered by economically driven media algorithms interacting with our brain's neurochemistry to ensure our attention belongs to someone else; shortened, fragmented, and monetized. Distraction diverts our gaze from the most pressing concerns we face. Our stamina to look and really *see* the perils of our life in the world wanes, as suffering plays on endless loop in the palm of our hands.

In the midst of all the bewildering and enervating aspects of our present life, we are often called on to hope. But some hope is easily captivated by the present of the world, and can, in fact, lead to more anxiety. But true hope, that which the author terms "feral hope" is not domesticated, but is the transforming hope of the God of Jesus Christ.

Events initially provoking shock soon come to seem a minor annoyance that we push to the back of our minds as we attempt to get back to some sense of normalcy in our ever-upended lives. Or we become tired of the constancy of it all and turn away to forestall the creeping anxiety. We strain to hold the weight of the realities we face in solitude, yet we keep silence, afraid to spread our anxiety to others, hesitating to provoke political differences ever on the verge of exploding, uncertain if our concerns will be validated by others or simply dismissed as a sign of our own depressive state.

Leaders for the future church face the perils and possibilities of futures that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. We've only scratched the surface of these realities because they are so multifaceted and diffuse that they resist being conceptually held together in ways that are approachable for clergy and congregations. Much of the anxiety we experience in relation to these potential futures comes out in anxiety for our *congregations'* future. Yet, I suspect there's more to our future-oriented anxiety than that, much of it unspoken and redirected into other anxiety outlets. In cultivating leaders for the future church, there may be no more important, *and no more fraught*, theological notion than that of *hope*, especially in an era punctuated by collapse: of climate, of supply chains, of economic stability, of democracies, of public health, of religious institutions.

Hope in Captivity

The biblical text is full of stories of hope in captivity. The narrative of the Exodus from Egyptian enslavement is recapitulated and reinterpreted all the way through to the Gospels. The sixth century BCE Babylonian captivity became the context out of which the exilic and post-exilic literature—that is, *most* of the Hebrew Bible—was written, including many quintessential texts of hope (e.g., Isaiah 40). The texts of the New Testament, all composed under the Roman occupation of Palestine and the rest of the Mediterranean region, are the writings upon which Christian theologies of hope have been constructed for millennia, the Gospels composed shortly after *another* destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Empire.

The fact that we have theologized hope outside of these contexts of captivity and domination and despair has resulted in the very notion of hope itself becoming captive to the ideologies of our present empires.

For many of us, these contexts of captivity, of oppression, of imperial domination and violence are no longer the contexts forming our practical theologies of hope. The fact that we have theologized hope *outside* of these contexts of captivity and domination and despair has resulted in the very notion of hope *itself* becoming captive to the ideologies of our present empires. Our ability to practice hope as leaders for the future church is diminished by at least two current captivities.

Hope's captivity to *optimism*, the prevailing social-emotional hegemony in the United States, is the first. *Looking on the bright side, searching for the silver lining, believing that it'll all work out in the end because that's what we're supposed to believe.* And it's easy to cover optimism with a thin theological veneer. Compounding this cultural optimism, a "normalcy bias" results from our cognitive preference for stability. Even when there is no promise of stability on the horizon, our brain will work hard to help us ease our way through potential disaster in a state of denial, planning for our future assuming that that future will be very similar to the past. We will *try* to believe whatever is less alarming about potential disaster, instability, or collapse.[1]

Hope's captivity to an *ideology of progress*, the philosophical fuel that runs our techno-scientific and economic engines, is closely related. *Things are always getting better, discoveries and inventions in science and technology will save us, history is an upward movement toward greater good.* In progress's narrative, hope becomes beholden to a form of presentism in which economic, political, and techno futures are only derivative versions of the present, always presumed to be getting better. This "hope" for a reprisal of the present is what Terry Eagleton calls an "endlessly distended present" in which "one can thus combine the excitement of seeing what futurity will deliver with the comfort of knowing that it will involve no inconvenient upheaval."[2]

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[1] See Haim Omer and Nahman Alon, "The Continuity Principle: A Unified Approach to Disaster and Trauma," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 22, no. 2 (1994): 278.

It's easy to believe in progress when there is much evidence for it: medical technology, scientific discovery, communications technology bringing the world together. But to be true believers in progress, we must minimize witnessing the unintended consequences of our progress. For example, the growing concern over the relationship between the instability of adolescent mental health alongside increases in isolation and loneliness correlated with the increased use of social media and virtual technologies. And we must ignore those for whom progress bespeaks death, like the modern-day slave laborers in the cobalt mines of the Congo fueling the production of rechargeable batteries for phones, computers, and cars.

It's not that there *isn't* progress, of course. We benefit from it every time we don't die from a minor infection (if we have access to medical care). It's just that progress is not linear, but instead halting and sometimes regressing. It is never equitable, but benefits some to the detriment of others. And progress in many areas is arrived upon through recipes that could as easily *destroy* us as *save* us—from nuclear physics to pharmacology to artificial intelligence. Progress as a narrative describing humanity's upward trajectory through time is a dangerous fiction that often supplants hope, skewing our vision of the past and substituting myriad future possibilities with more of the present.

Church visioning and future planning is often beholden to these captivates, too. Our discussion of hope is only about the hope of *this* congregation surviving, dependent on tinkering with the status quo because we believe most things will be the same in the future if we just figure out how to have better marketing, different music, change locations, decrease costs, and add attractive programs so that we can have *just a little more* of the good stuff we desire: more people, younger people, increased giving. But we spend too much time thinking about the changes and challenges faced by our specific congregations divorced from larger social-cultural, political, technological, and ecological contexts which influence the life and ministry of churches far more than attendance and giving trends.[3] And any “hope” we express in the process is captive to optimism, or the presumed need for it, and the presentism of our progress narratives. This is a hope domesticated beyond recognition by the prevailing ideologies of the era.

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[2] Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 10.

Rewilding our Hope

For it to be of any use to future faith leaders or of theological substance for congregations, hope must be made wild again, undomesticated from its captivity to ideologies of progress and the cultural conditioning of optimism: a *feral* hope. Feral hope no longer behaves as hope “should” under the confines of domestication—placing faith in progress, beholden to optimism’s emotional hegemony. It becomes wily and less predictable, growing where it shouldn’t, intermingling with despair, generating seemingly unintelligible activity that we’ve never *called* “hopeful” before.

Feral hope is a hope that is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, alongside Jesus emerging from the baptismal waters in the Synoptic Gospels. It is hope dashed and born again, like the disciples moving all along the way of Jesus—misunderstanding, halting, sometimes regressing, yet buoyed by surprise and wonder and the intrigue of companions moving along a winding pathway. Feral hope is a hope that travels to the grave—the place of death, the aftermath of violence—unsuspecting. Like the women coming to the tomb of their crucified beloved *not* to witness resurrection, but to anoint a *corpse* with spices and tears. It is a hope-against-hope, a hope acquainted with hopelessness, a hope born of the alchemy of grief and wonder.

Feral hope is *radical hope*. As Jonathan Lear describes it, “What makes this hope *radical* is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.”[4] Feral hope is *active hope*. “Something we *do* rather than *have*,” as Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone describe it. It takes a clear view of reality as it is and cultivates a vision for a desired direction in which to move that is rooted in the deepest values we hold and affirmed by concrete steps in that direction.[5] Always without guarantee. *Waking up* to the reality in which we live, feral hope is also *melancholic hope*, "in opposition to triumphant, overconfident narratives, tropes, and images."[6] As Joseph Winters argues, it is a hope that remembers losses, a hope that mourns the almost forgotten, a hope that takes stock of the violence we have inflicted on others, and a hope that disturbed by the suffering of others. A "hope draped in black" is a hope "receptive to those dissonant, uncomfortable dimensions of life and history that threaten our sense of stability, coherence, and achievement."[7]

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[3] For a method to think through the confluence of these factors, see Cody J. Sanders, “Decentering the Human in Practical Theologies of Care: An EARTH Method,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 27, no. 1 (2023): 23–45.

[4] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 103.

Geographer Leslie Head argues that the movement of civilization has been "widely understood as forward through time, and upward out of nature."[8] If feral hope can be cultivated and practiced amid the slow decline of civilization, punctuated by numerous precipitous collapses, it must resist the intoxicating lure of progressive narrative of moving forward through time, and must (re)turn us to nature. We are, after all, creatures molded of the earth –from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7)—and inextricably bound up with the ecological web of life all the way down to our microbiome with hundreds of trillions of microbes that outnumber human cells in our body ten to one.[9]

Drawing on the "feral" metaphor should not be only a thought experiment. What is feral—whether animal or vegetal—is not simply a "wild" creature. It is a wild example of an otherwise domesticated creature. One that has *reverted* into wildness. One that has *escaped* its captivity and shed its domestication to become *re*wilded. To cultivate a feral hope means engaging with the wider web of life in which we are always and ever entangled. The feralization of our hope places us in greater solidarity alongside the one million of the earth's eight million species that are threatened with extinction due to climate and ecological destruction caused by humans' attachment to progress narratives and our attempted extraction from the web of life that enfolds us.[10]

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[5] Joanna Macey and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), 3.

[6] Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 16.

[7] Winters. *Hope Draped in Black*, 7.

[8] Lesley Head, *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene: Re-Conceptualising Human-Nature Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 43.

[9] Marilyn Hair and Jon Sharpe, "Fast Facts about the Human Microbiome," Center for Ecogenetics & Environmental Health, 2014, https://depts.washington.edu/ceeh/downloads/FF_Microbiome.pdf

This entanglement within the ecological web of life is not only important for our own lives in a living world on the brink. It is also the earth-entangled vision that shaped the expression of our faith tradition through the ages. From the Psalmist, "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1), to Job, "Ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you" (Job 12:8), to the Gospel writers who iterate the public announcement of God's incarnate presence in the world at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan with the incarnation of the Spirit descending in the avian flesh of a dove.[11] These sacred texts bespeak an ecological web of life that is expressive of intimate knowledge of the Divine, and with which we can be in both communication and solidarity. We have an impaired engagement with the practice of our Christian faith if our relationship to the wider web of life is imperiled by this upward-out-of-nature movement that has been both a hallmark of civilization and is now becoming its demise.

A greater intimacy with the ecological web of life helps us to root our hope in processes that belie our captivity to ideologies of progress. In an ecology of feral hope, the process of decay leads to new life. Environmental geographer Jamie Lorimer relates a "profound lesson in finitude" first iterated to him by a botanist colleague as they ate apples together in a neglected urban cemetery:

> She traced the fruit's possible molecular history—from subterranean human corpse, broken by bacteria, carried in the body of a worm to the reaching roots. Lifted high to branch, to bud, and finally to fruit. A bite, a chew, a swallow, and, after some acidic digestion, into me. From human to humus to human again through a humorous, rotten epiphany.[12]

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[10] "Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating,'" *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, press release, May 6, 2019, https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment.

[11] See Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

[12] Jamie Lorimer, "Rot," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016): 235.

A humorous, rotten epiphany of life to death to life again better describes the nature of feral hope—and a cruciform hope—escaping our theological imagination's captivity to notions of optimism and narratives of progress. All beings in the ecological web of life and even in the cosmic envelope of our life on this small, peculiar planet are our partners in apprehending the presence and activity of the Divine within and among us. In solidarity with the wider ecological web of life, we have the potential to develop a more real, a more rugged, and a more expansively relational form of hope to shape the practice of Christian ministry as leaders for the future church.

FERAL HOPE AMID COLLAPSE

With increasingly disruptive effects of climate change, the attending climate migrations within and between nations, the polarization of society, attacks on democracy in the United States and beyond, technological warfare that makes it increasingly difficult to respond to *any* crisis, or even to discern accurate from intentionally false information—facing the interrelated challenges of our near future is daunting. A feral hopefulness in this context necessitates that we face these challenges in community. After all, mutual aid is also a lesson we learn from the larger web of life, despite "survival of the fittest" more neatly supporting our individualistic narratives of competition and conquest.[13] While it is difficult to prescribe specific practices for the many and varied communities we inhabit, I want to sketch a few ways into the cultivation of feral hope to fuel experiments in your own context.

As a starting place to consider the feralization of hope-in-practice, I offer a heuristic shaped around three dimensions: *transcendence*, *togetherness*, and *tethering*. This is a heuristic that attempts not to prescribe what to "have hope in," but ways to shape our hopeful orientation toward potential futures—a type of hope shaped around horizons of possibilities-in-relationship.

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[13] See Pablo Servigne and Gauthier Chapelle, *Mutual Aid: The Other Law of the Jungle*, trans. Andrew Brown (Medford, MA: Polity Press 2022). And for an on-the-ground manual for mutual aid and caring praxis in context of social destabilization and catastrophe, see Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023).

Transcendence describes our connection to a context of ultimacy, or God. Christian communities have many ways to describe the content of this dimension. It is the language of our theological tradition, our hymnody, the shape of our sacred ritual. Other religious traditions would populate this dimension with different language and song and ritual. And non-religious communities speak to the transcendence dimension through appealing to deeply held values and commitments that are celebrated and held with reverence. But key to the transcendence dimension, whatever religious, ethical, or spiritual tradition one practices, is the opening outward of the self toward a something beyond the self. Nothing quite provokes such an opening outward than experiences of wonder. In our preaching and teaching, in our ritual and music, and in our immersive, communicative relationality with the ecological web of life, the provocation of wonder helps turn us to a transcendence dimension when our world seems to be closing in on us.

> *For example, gathering around the table of grace for the communion meal binds us to one another in community across time and space, even as it turns us toward the dimension of transcendence and roots us in the goodness of the earth in gifts of bread and wine.*

Togetherness speaks to our connection to others in expansive human community. Turning toward one another, again, moves us beyond the bounded individualism that keeps us sequestered in solitude, loneliness, and isolation. Left alone with our fear, anger, and sadness provoked by volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous circumstances, our very understandable emotions elongate into temperaments of helplessness, immobilization, despair, numbness, resentment, and vengefulness.[14] The togetherness dimension invites practices of ministry that help us to look beyond the self toward one another; to stand alongside one another in grief, in solidarity, in gratitude. To notice who is missing, and whose loss needs mourning. This dimension is deeply embedded in our Christian tradition, too. For example, gathering around the table of grace for the communion meal binds us to one another in community across time and space, even as it turns us toward the dimension of transcendence and roots us in the goodness of the earth in gifts of bread and wine.

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[14] For an exploration of emotions—fear, anger, and sadness alongside grief, gratitude, and wonder—in times of catastrophe, see Cody J. Sanders, "Feeling Our Way through an Apocalypse," in *Doing Theology in Pandemics: Facing Viruses, Violence, and Vitriol* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2022).

Tethering orients us toward our intimate and inextricable relationship to the earth, mooring us in relational solidarity with the wider web of life. This most neglected dimension of our ministry praxis subverts the civilizational pull "upward out of nature" by turning our gaze downward toward the dirt from which we came and to which we will return. Tethering calls us to engagement with other earth creatures not as *admirers* of their beauty, but as *beings in solidarity* with other earth creatures experiencing the roiling collapse of the climate and the Sixth Mass Extinction alongside us in a companionship of grief and mutual aid.[15] Tethering practices help us engage the earth as a relational web rather than a cadre of resources, bespeaking a relationship of belonging. Not the earth belonging to us, but our belonging to the earth.

Whatever diminishes our capacities to experience transcendence, togetherness, and tethering is the enemy of hope, and is toxic theology to boot. Yet, practicing a feral hope does not mean believing that everything will work out in the end, that things are bound to get better, or that, ultimately, we can avert the many disasters facing us in a precarious near future. Feral hope, instead, leads us into relationships of solidarity with the wider web of life, and away from our individualism and human supremacy. Feral hope leads us out of our consumerism of comfortable assurance toward becoming scavengers for fragments of flourishing in relationship with others who are also living with a view of the brink.

Feral hope is the hope of Jesus. Not transcending flesh but entering it. Not bypassing death but embracing it. Never letting the empire speak the last word. ⊕

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[15] See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2014).